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ABSTRACT

This paper presents two proposals for improving programs that prepare groups for an intercultural experience. The paper should be helpful to instructors who train foreign service personnel, technical advisors, Peace Corps volunteers, and missionaries. First, instructors should make participants in a training program aware of the severe limitations of their instruction. Programs usually devote a portion of their instruction to developing the participant's understanding of the other culture. However, time available for that part of the program typically ranges from a few hours to a few days. In such a brief period, even the best instruction can develop only a very limited and superficial understanding of the other culture. Participants should be made aware of these severe limitations and be provided with a detailed outline of their remaining ignorance of relevant aspects of the other culture. The second proposal which follows logically from the first is that the intercultural experience should be a planned learning experience. This means that one's learning to understand that other culture would proceed systematically, according to a plan, and under the learner's control. The plan would vary somewhat for different individuals. Instruction would have to familiarize participants with the plan they are to follow, and help them develop the cognitive skills they will need to understand and employ the concepts and techniques involved in this kind of learning process. (Author/RM)

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PREFATORY NOTE

Dr. Kraemer, a member of HumRRO's Educational and Training Systems Division, presented this paper in a symposium on "The Intercultural Experience: Impact on Personnel and Performance" at the 1981 Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association in Los Angeles. The symposium was sponsored by the U.S. Navy Overseas Duty Support Program, Washington, D.C. Other participants in the symposium were Dr. Richard Brislin of the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii, and Dr. H.C. Triandis of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The panel was chaired by Dr. Sandra Mumford, Director of the U.S. Navy Overseas Duty Support Program. Discussants were Dr. H. Wallace Sinaiko of the Smithsonian Institution and Dr. Robert Hayles of the Office of Naval Research. The symposium was featured on the agenda of the APA Division of Military Psychology (Division 19).

THE INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCE

AS A PLANNED LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Alfred J. Kraemer

I am going to discuss an aspect of "the intercultural experience", and preparation for it, that is especially relevant for individuals whose jobs require them to have a fairly good understanding of the other culture, and who have frequent occasion, over an extended period, to interact with its people and to observe the latter's interactions among themselves.[1] This includes Foreign Service personnel, technical advisors, Peace Corps Volunteers, missionaries and others assigned abroad, as well as certain groups who interact with foreign nationals or with members of ethnic minorities in the United States, such as teachers and mental health professionals.

Programs that prepare such groups for their intercultural experience commonly operate under unrealistic budget constraints. Nevertheless, they usually devote a portion of their instruction to developing the participants' understanding of the other culture (or of the several other cultures that may be involved).[2,3] The time available for that part of the program typically ranges from a few hours to a few days. In such a brief period, even the best instruction can develop only a very limited and superficial understanding of the other culture.[4] It is unlikely that these constraints will become less severe in the foreseeable future. An examination of the implications of this unsatisfactory state of affairs has led me to develop two proposals for improvement that I can only briefly outline here.[5]

My first proposal is that program administrators should provide "full disclosure" concerning that part of the program. By this, I mean that participants should be made aware of the severe limitations of their instruction, and should be provided with a detailed outline of their remaining ignorance of relevant aspects of the other culture. It should not be assumed that these shortcomings will be obvious to them, even if the instruction is labelled "general" or "introductory" or as an "orientation". The significance of this point may become apparent in a comparison with learning a foreign language.

When one has participated in language instruction for only a few hours or a few days, there is no need to be told of its shortcomings. One is acutely aware of how limited the learning has been, and how much is yet unknown. For example, one would know that one is unable to carry on a conversation beyond simple pleasantries, to read a newspaper, to write a commercial letter, and so

forth, depending on one's level of proficiency in various language skills. This awareness extends to a very specific level. When one is trying to use the language, one is immediately aware, for example, of what words one does not know and of one's difficulty in spelling a word. The reason we are able to make such judgments so readily is simple. We can easily compare our skills in the foreign language with those we have in our own.

Unfortunately, the same is not true for one's understanding of another culture, except at the most elementary level--that of "survival skills." There are three psychological processes that make it almost impossible for most people to have an accurate picture--even only a general one--of their ignorance of another culture. The first is the most subtle and probably the most pervasive of the three, but it has received little attention in psychology. It derives from the fact that persons with limited intercultural experience typically know very little concerning cultural aspects of their own society, and have little awareness of the pervasive affects of their own cultural conditioning. As a result, they erroneously--and mostly unwittingly--assume that many non-universal aspects of their own culture and of their own way of thinking are universal and are therefore shared by the other culture.[6]

The second process is more familiar--the stereotyping of people of another culture which occurs in spite of the fact that one knows little about them.[7] Even when these stereotypes are relatively accurate, they are often so general that they are not helpful in developing an understanding of the other culture. Brief instruction is not likely to change these stereotypes and may actually reinforce them.

The third process is the projection of undesirable aspects of one's own culture onto the other--the "mirror image" phenomenon-which is particularly relevant when there is a state of acute conflict between the two.[8]

These processes tend to fill the gaps in what little has been learned during instruction to create the illusion among participants of having a much greater understanding than they actually have.[9,10] Permitting this to happen does them a great disservice. It leaves them with an unrealistic expectation concerning their ability to recognize cultural differences, and is likely to cause them to have difficulties they might otherwise have avoided. I believe research would show that the effectiveness of their subsequent intercultural interactions is determined much less by what they have learned than by their understanding of the nature and extent of their remaining ignorance. In providing participants with full disclosure, it would be especially important to identify the variety of interpersonal circumstances under which there are likely to be manifestations of cultural influences that they will probably not be able to recognize.

I now turn to my second proposal, which follows logically from the first, and which is the main subject of my remarks. You will recall that I am referring only to the intercultural experience of individuals who have frequent occasion, over an extended period, to interact with people of another culture and to observe the latter's interactions among themselves. It seems clear that if only a very limited understanding of the other culture can be developed during instruction, the serious culture learning must take place in connection with these interactions. In fact, that is when it should occur, for that is when the great opportunities for learning the culture present themselves. Undoubtedly, some such learning already takes place. But it is bound to occur in haphazard fashion, by unsystematic trial-and-error, depending on the luck of circumstances, impeded by frequent lack of feedback or by misleading feedback when mistakes are made--in short, with practically no control over the process by the learner.[11] As a result, most of these individuals probably develop much less understanding of the other culture than they are capable of developing, and are much less effective in their intercultural work than they might otherwise be. These kinds of considerations have led me to the concept of the intercultural experience as a planned learning experience.

This means that one's learning to understand the other culture would proceed systematically, according to a plan, and under the learner's control. The plan would vary somewhat for different groups of individuals, depending on the kinds of work they do, especially for those parts of the learning that would occur in connection with on-the-job interactions. Implementation of this concept would naturally require a reorientation of current instruction. Instead of attempting to develop the participants' understanding of the other culture, instruction would aim at developing their ability to acquire that understanding by themselves, systematically, during their intercultural experience. Specifically, the instruction would have to familiarize participants with the plan they are to follow, and help them develop the cognitive skills they will need to understand and employ the concepts and techniques involved in this kind of learning process. Most of the concepts already exist. The plans and techniques would have to be designed. Implementation of this new kind of instruction could proceed in steps as the combined plans, concepts and techniques were gradually developed and made available to the programs.

The most intriguing aspect of the proposal is the possibility that its implementation might have beneficial side-effects on one's adapatation to the other culture.[12] Instead of creating the illusion of developing the participants' understanding of the culture (an illusion that would, in many cases, soon be shattered), the instruction would focus the participants' attention on the imperative need for future self-directed learning and on its rewards, would provide them with the necessary knowledge and skills, and would develop their confidence in their ability to carry out that task. As a result, some aspects of intercultural experience that might normally have led to frustration and discouragement might instead be perceived as the anticipated opportunities for learning.

Consideration must, of course, be given to the role of language in facilitating this kind of culture learning. It is mainly in some of what people say to each other, and in how and when they say it, that the subtle aspects of their cultural conditioning manifest themselves. When two people in an intercultural encounter cannot talk to each other without an interpreter, their interaction does not provide as ripe an opportunity for culture learning as when they share a common language, or when either has some knowledge of the other's language. Fortunately, translation of the peculiar ideas of one culture into somewhat equivalent ideas of another is quite difficult and often impossible.

I regret that time constraints prevent me from discussing my proposals in detail. I will close my remarks with a quotation from someone who--being unencumbered by the effects of higher education--was able to make my main point much more succinctly than I can. He said, "It ain't what folks don't know that makes 'em so damned ignorant, it's the things they know that ain't so." [13]

NOTES

1. There are different ways of "understanding" a culture. The most common way involves the kind of understanding lay people have of their own culture. They understand it in the sense that the effects of their cultural conditioning manifest themselves in their behavior, their cognitions, and their emotional reactions, but with little awareness of the causal relationship between their culture and themselves. (Intercultural experience may develop this awareness to some extent.)

Then there is the understanding of another culture that people develop at home or in school; through the media; or through brief foreign travel or superficial interaction with immigrants, foreign visitors, or members of minority cultures. This kind of understanding is usually in terms of stereotypes, and is ethnocentric in the sense that aspects of the other culture are unwittingly seen, interpreted, and judged from one's own cultural perspective. This kind of understanding may involve crass ethnocentrism, or it may simply reflect the biasing effects of one's own cultural conditioning in spite of one's good intentions.

A third kind of understanding is that of cultural anthropologists and students of cultural influences in other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology and political science. It is--ideally--a nonethnocentric view in which each culture is seen from a pancultural perspective, or from an imagined extraterrestrial one, as it were. For anthropologists, this also involves the integration of all aspects of each culture at high levels of abstraction. Some anthropologists have debated over whether an "etic" or an "emic" approach is the better way to achieve this kind of understanding, but most would probably agree with Hall (1976) that both are required.

Finally, there is the kind of understanding lay people develop of another culture during the process of acculturation--a sort of adult socialization into a second culture, with or without desocialization from the first one. In spite of considerable research on this process, little is known about how the resulting understanding of a second culture differs from the understanding one would have had of the first at the same stage in one's life. If no desocialization from the first culture occurs, one becomes bicultural, and the nature of one's understanding of both cultures is eventually the same, although one's original understanding of the first is presumably changed in the process.

Programs that prepare Americans for intercultural work do not spell out just what kind of understanding of the other culture their instruction is intended to develop. That has to be inferred from the approach taken. Since the first kind of understanding is impossible to develop through instruction, and since the second kind is not helpful, the aim is presumably to develop one of the other two kinds, to some extent. The main arguments advanced in these

remarks apply to either of the latter cases, since both the anthropological and the lay bicultural understanding take several years to develop.

2. The reference here is not to instruction dealing with the history or with easily discernible aspects of the other culture--the "customs and habits," the artifacts, the "do's and don'ts," the foods and clothing, etc. The concern here is only with that part of the instruction intended to develop one's understanding of the values and implicit assumptions prevailing in the culture, and one's ability to recognize their institutional and psychological manifestations when they are encountered.

3. The words "instruction" and "participants" or "learners" are used throughout these remarks, rather than "training" and "trainees" because much of what occurs in these programs is not training, even though it may be so labelled by program administrators.

4. There is probably no evidence to support this assertion, but it could easily be obtained by administering appropriately difficult criterion measures to participants at the conclusion of instruction. But program administrators are understandably reluctant to do that. However, the assertion must surely be true. Otherwise, cultural anthropologists, and area and country specialists, have been going about their business the wrong way, for they devote many years of study to developing a good understanding of another culture or of a few related ones. This is not to suggest that there should be an attempt to make culture or area specialists of people whose professions require them to be specialists in other fields. For most of them, this would seem neither desirable nor feasible.

5. These proposals are based on the author's work in developing and implementing an instructional approach that is a step in the direction advocated here (Kraemer, 1973, 1978).

6. This process is analogous to the pervasive process of projection of one's own psychological characteristics and processes onto other people. (See the review by Murstein & Pryer, 1959.) In spite of its pervasiveness, and in spite of the renewed attention it has received in attribution studies (Ross, Green, & House, 1977), there has apparently been no research on this process in an intercultural context. Its manifestations can readily be observed, however--when one knows what to look for--in the intercultural interactions of people with little intercultural experience, and in their interpretations of events involving people of another culture. This is probably quite common among Americans. Most of us are conditioned, in effect, to believe that we are not--or need not be--subject to cultural conditioning, and we are therefore more likely to assume that our way of looking at things is culturally neutral.

7. Isaacs (1958) has provided ample evidence of this process.

8. One of the earliest analyses of this process was by Bronfenbrenner (1961). Excellent examples are contained in the cable on

the "Iranian psyche" sent to the State Department by the U.S. Embassy in Teheran prior to its takeover. (See "Message from Iran: Aug. 13, '79: in New York Times, January 27, 1981.)

9. This is analogous to what happens when one forms an impression of another person on the basis of very fragmentary knowledge. Research on impression formation has a long history in psychology (see Hastorf, Schneider, and Ellsworth, 1979). It has been shown that gaps in one's knowledge are quickly filled-in to produce a much more complete picture than is warranted.

10. The three processes referred to probably occur in some combination in which they may affect each other. But this is not relevant to the issue being discussed.

11. Mistakes made in the course of learning to understand another culture are frequently made in the form of erroneous causal attributions of some behavior of its members. These attributions may be made silently, without being communicated to anyone, and are usually assumed to be correct. If they are shared with a colleague, they are likely to be reinforced since the latter would probably have made the same mistake. If they are acted upon and the action results in negative feedback from members of the other culture, one's response is more likely to be puzzlement or a further error in attribution rather than a search for the original mistake.

12. This notion applies more to intercultural experiences abroad than to those occurring in one's own culture.

13. Anonymous, quoted by Cantril (1961).

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